

INTERVIEW WITH MY SECOND HUSBAND: HOW WE MET AND MARRIED

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of Flyingfreenow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 207 of the Flying Free Podcast, and today I have a very interesting guest with me, someone who I had asked if he would come on the show about maybe two years ago, and he said categorically “no” — he was not interested in doing that. And I thought I would reach out to him and see again if he might be interested in doing it now. A couple more years have gone by, maybe he'd be more comfortable with it. And guess what? He said “yes.” I want to introduce you to my husband, Tom Hoffman. Tom, welcome to the show.

TOM: Thank you.

NATALIE: He's a little giggly today because he doesn't usually do this, so this is going to be a very off the cuff interview. Well, it's not really an interview — it's going to be a conversation about how Tom and I met. Now, I've told a few little details to the people inside of my Flying Free Sisterhood program. And that's like a circle of people, and we sit around and we share stories. So they've heard some of my stories, okay? But I've never publicly told the story about how Tom and I met and got married the day after my divorce was final. I know. Scandalous. I bet you want to know the details. That's what we're here for.

So we're going to start, and you'll hear it from both of our perspectives. But I think the perspective that you're mostly interested in hearing it from is Tom's, because you've never heard from him before. And I thought about asking him if he wanted to do this in video format, but I was pretty sure he'd say no. So we're just going to listen to his voice. And by the way, I think he has an amazing voice, and I loved listening to it when I was getting to know him. We were just having phone conversations. And so I'm excited that you guys get to at least meet his voice.

All right, so Tom, you know what I think everyone wants to know? They really want to know why you, a bachelor for however many years — well, I think you were forty-nine when we met — why in the world did you want to marry a woman with nine kids who was divorced?

TOM: Yeah, I think it was forty-eight. Was it forty-eight? I think it was forty-eight. But

excellent question, Natalie. So I go back to when we first... Well, you are the one that started this whole thing with the letter — and you can talk about that — and then when I responded to that. But I go back to thinking it was the timing for me, and we had talked about this, where I was in my life. If we would've met earlier, even if we were single, I don't know if we would've hit it off. For me, I was just in a different space, and I think I was ready to explore the possibilities.

NATALIE: "Explore the possibilities!"

TOM: Well, and you know this because part of my deal was that my plan was — you guys are going to love this — I was going to marry a Roman Catholic that had never been married with no children. So boy did I get that wrong.

NATALIE: By the way, we are sharing a mic, so it's a little awkward. So if you hear things come in and out or whatever, you know — the sound quality is not going to be probably the best, but this is the only way we could do this, right?

So yeah, he's right. I did initiate the whole thing. Although this is definitely not what I thought I was initiating. So what happened was I had been separated from my husband for a couple of years, and I was sitting in the waiting room waiting for my son to get out of preschool. He had a preschool class. He had autism and it was a special class, and I think he was three at the time. And I was scrolling through my Facebook, and here's the thing. I had just had this reunion with some people from my choir, the singing group I was in in high school, and we hadn't seen each other since high school. I think most of us hadn't. And we had had this reunion. And of course when you have a reunion like that, you're like, "Oh, where are you on Facebook? Oh, let's be Facebook friends," right?

And so I had done that, but when you start befriending people on Facebook, then Facebook will actually bring up suggestions like, "Well, what about this person that you knew from high school? Do you want to be friends with them?" So I would see images of people that I knew from... I didn't really know who they were that much, but it was kind of fun. Like some people, I was like, "Yeah," and I would send him a friend request. Well, while I'm sitting there waiting for my son to get out, I see this picture of Tom Hoffman. I'm sorry — I'm going to be doing a lot of talking here now because this part is my part of the story. So is that okay, Tom?

TOM: Yeah, I'm still here.

NATALIE: Okay, so I see this picture of Tom Hoffman. And here's the thing that you have to know about Tom Hoffman. We were in fourth grade together and fifth grade

together, incidentally, but those were the only two grades we were in together. But in fourth grade, there was a connection, but not a very good one. And it was actually quite traumatic. I think I've said this before on the podcast. I was severely bullied for several years through late grade school and then into junior high by both boys and girls.

And I'm not going to get into that, but Tom Hoffman, who really wasn't a ringleader of much of this, but this one thing happened that was actually one of the more traumatizing pieces of bullying that had happened to me — yes, I married my grade school bully — is he was poking me in the back one day. I was sitting at my desk, and he started just poking me. And we had a very unruly class that year. There were a lot of boys and girls who were problematic and caused a lot of problems for the teacher, and the teacher really didn't have a handle on the class.

So I don't know how this happened, but he was poking me in the back and I just ignored it. I thought, "If I ignore it, maybe he'll go away." Well, he didn't. He kept poking and poking and poking, and eventually I whirled around. I was in just a fit of rage. And I was just so sick and tired of being picked on, and I grabbed his shirt and I pulled on it. And I honestly don't remember... And Tom doesn't remember this at all, okay? It didn't traumatize him. I pull on his shirt, and I think it must have popped a button or ripped or something, but something happened that made him really mad. Maybe he was just mad because I pulled his shirt. I don't know. He got super mad and he took his fist and he pounded it down on the top of my head, and it hurt. And also it scared me and I ran out of the room, and I honestly have no idea what happened after that. But I do remember always thinking that Tom Hoffman was a big, scary, nasty boy.

And then as we went on through... He lived in my neighborhood, but we continued to go through grade school and junior high and high school together. And that was the only incident that I ever had with him. He was actually a popular hockey player. He was the president of our senior class. He was actually a pretty nice guy, I think. He didn't have the character of some of those bullies.

But what happened was I saw his picture come up, and I was actually really creeped out by it. His picture creeped me out because this memory immediately surfaced. And so with morbid fascination I started scrolling through his Facebook page, and I saw that he had pictures of him traveling, pictures of him with his mom, pictures of him with some of his friends, and there was no wife, there were no kids. And my first thought was, "Oh, maybe he's gay." He was a pretty good looking guy. And then my next thought was — because he also had a lot of Bible verses on his Facebook wall — my next thought was, "Oh, well, he must have found Jesus since his abuser days."

And I was actually moved by that because at that time, I was going through a lot of my memories and remembering a lot of really hard things and also learning how to stand up for myself, but also trying to come to a place of forgiveness for people in my past who had hurt me, and I decided on a whim — I honestly don't know what drove me to this — probably God — I decided to reach out to him and just send him a private message and say, “Hey, I don't know if you remember this...” You know what? We should really stop and go get that.

Okay. We did stop and we went and got it. It took us forever to scroll through our entire Facebook Messenger history because we've been married for five years, and we do a lot of... Anyway, so here's the very first message that I sent him. And this is in the middle of January of 2016.

“I fell down a Facebook rabbit hole and saw your profile. I'm going to be honest and say that the creepiest feeling washed over me when I saw your name and picture. I only remember you as one of the boys who bullied me in grade school. You were one of many. I lived in a neighborhood packed with bullies. My keenest memory of you is in Mr. Belrose's class. You were poking me in the back over and over and over. I finally turned around and grabbed your shirt and ripped it. You proceeded to punch the top of my head multiple times until I ran out of the room. At least that's what I remember. But as I scrolled through your timeline, I came to a Bible verse and then another one and another one, and in the middle of my three-year-old son's preschool hallway, I couldn't control the tears.”

Oh, I forgot about that. I'm writing this as it's happening, okay? You know how you remember things when you're actually doing them, but then six years later, you can't remember? Okay, so it obviously had an impact on me. Okay, so let me go back to the reading now.

“Somehow that little girl inside of me healed just a little. My life has not been an easy one. Not very many people have easy lives, right? But I think I caught a glimpse of how God redeems things in time, and I am glad to know that you know Him. Back then, if someone had asked me what I would've wanted for all of you cruel boys, I would've said and meant sincerely, ‘I want them to know Jesus.’ I'm praising Him today that at least one of you does. I hope hearing these things does not bring you pain, but joy. Happy New Year.”

Okay, so Tom, why don't you read your response? So he responded to me.

TOM: Okay. I did respond, but let me... Okay, I'll get closer. It's funny, guys — she keeps

on pointing me, like, "Move closer to the mic. Move closer to the mic." Is that better? Good?

NATALIE: Yes.

TOM: Okay. What I remember, listening to that, I remember reading that in my apartment and thinking that you had taken... Because obviously you're showing vulnerability there, and that really took me by surprise, and I remember thinking, "Man, I definitely have to respond," but I didn't really know how to respond, so I thought about it. I thought about it for a while, and I think then I went down the rabbit hole and looked at your Facebook page too. You're very pretty. The dress you wore at Sam's wedding, you look very pretty. But anyway. I took the time and then I put some thoughts together. And it's funny, you know, what I do is I write stuff down and then I reread it and I write it. I know that's just what I did, but you read this. I'm not good at reading this.

NATALIE: Okay. All right.

TOM: Is that okay?

NATALIE: Yeah.

TOM: All right. Okay.

NATALIE: Okay, so this is what he wrote. "Truth is, I liked you back then," which was a bald lie, I just want to say.

TOM: Nope, that's not true. I think I did.

NATALIE: He doesn't even remember me. "And being the immature young boy that I was, I did not know how to deal with how I was feeling. I wanted to fit in with the crowd and not be different. No excuses. I was a bully. I'm sorry. Not sure what the statute of limitations are for an apology that is decades overdue. I'm hoping you'll accept. Natalie, I'm thankful and feel blessed for your honesty. To your thoughts on pain or joy, it's both. Being completely honest with you and me, I feel both. I agree, life is hard at times. I've been through a few rough spots over the years, and the one constant that has brought me through it all has been our Lord Jesus Christ. There was one day in particular when my world was coming apart. I was trying so hard to control a situation, and it was in that moment I had an epiphany. I offered it all up to Him, prayed and believed with all my heart and soul that He would see me through whatever His will

was going to be.”

I'll just interject here. I found out later that was when his mom was on her deathbed, almost. In fact, both of his parents were in the hospital and he was overwhelmed and didn't know what to do. It was a very real chance that he was going to lose both of his parents at the same time. So anyway, that was what was going on there.

But, “It was in that moment that I felt complete peace. A warmth and security came over me that to this day is hard to explain. I knew it was in that moment that I knew the grace of God was with me, and no matter how things turned out, things were going to be okay. I'd like you to know that after reflecting on your thoughtful words today, hope and inspiration fills my heart. I found through the years there are people God puts in our lives to help us along our journey. They come and go. Some stay longer than others. I'm thankful God has chosen to cross our paths once again, allowing for reflection, healing, and showing us both how good He truly is. Peace and thank you, Natalie, for having the courage to reach out and share today. I understand this is not an easy thing to do, and I'm so grateful that you did. Wishing you a beautiful and blessed New Year too. A couple more verses I would like to share, especially for you, Natalie. God bless.”

And then he shared these two verses. Isaiah 58:8, “Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.” And Numbers 6:24 - 26, “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace.”

And that was that, you guys, until August 13, 2016. So this was in January. So in April I filed for divorce, and then I was having panic attacks; I got on medication. A lot of things happened between that January and then in August when we reconnected. But on August 13 for some reason, this is what he sent. So here's what he sent to me on Facebook Messenger:

“Good morning! One of my New Year's resolutions this year is to let those around me know they are special and loved. You are on my list for today. Continue to just be you. No one does it better. Enjoy the beautiful day.” And then he sent a couple of little quotes, okay?

TOM: So I remember that because... Oh, I'm getting closer again. So I remember I was looking at, I think I was looking at your Facebook page, and something was on there that just made me think about you. And I thought, “Man, I should just really reach out

again." So I just reached out. That's what I did, and I did. I remember having that resolution where I was going to try to identify people in my life, whether they're close friends or distant friends, and just reach out and tell people that I'm thinking about them, that they're special. So I do remember that.

NATALIE: Yeah. I mean, that is who he is. He's kind of that guy. So anyway, and then it looks like... I forgot about this, but it looks like... So a person from high school had come to pick up soap from me. I made soap at the time, and sometimes customers would come and pick up soap. And it was so weird because this person found me and she... I think she knew who I was. Anyway, she came to pick up soap and then when she picked soap up, we were reminiscing about high school and people. And so then after Tom sent that, I said, "Hey, you're never going to believe this, but Terry Andrews came and picked up soap and we were talking about Anita Harold and Kristen Penner and Matt Daly and John Borrell and Scott Branson" and all of these names, which, I hope to God nobody's listening to this that is any of those people, but anyway. And so it began, it looks like, and now we started kind of going back and forth talking about high school stuff.

TOM: Well, yeah. And I remember like all those names, because a lot of those names were guys that I played sports with, so all they were just resonating from the neighborhood, and I thought, "Oh my gosh." So then we just started going back and forth. I'm looking at this as scrolling. And it kind of took off from there. But man, we wrote a lot of stuff.

NATALIE: We were just sharing — he's kind of an artsy-fartsy person. He likes poetry and he likes music and art. I mean, we're actually literally strolling through this right now. We haven't looked at this in years. But we're just like being really nice to each other and sharing.

TOM: And well, here's the thing. Yeah, I had to see it. Then there, I don't know if you guys have seen the movie "Sing Street." I had watched it and I thought, "Oh, Natalie might like that." And I don't know why I thought that, but I recommended that she watch "Sing Street."

NATALIE: And so I did. I watched it with my sister and my niece and then my daughter. And here's the thing: I was really believing that this guy was gay. And I interestingly, fascinatingly enough, I felt very safe. Like if he was gay, then I was safe. It's like he wasn't doing all of this because he was trying to get into my pants. He was doing this because he just was... I mean, the gay people that I knew were so friendly and so sweet and so nice, so nonjudgmental. Just the opposite of a lot of the Christians I knew. And I

was kind of excited to think that I could actually have a friendship, a healthy friendship, with a guy without worrying about all of that other stuff.

And then when we watched "Sing Street," I was for sure thinking, "He's got to be gay. Only a gay person would like this movie." I mean, a gay man and women, right? So anyway, I had a lot of bad stereotypes in my brain at the time, but I'm glad that I thought that, because if I hadn't thought that, I probably would've shut this down really quickly because I was still in the middle of a divorce. I was not ready for a new relationship. And besides that, I honestly don't think it crossed my mind about a relationship anyways.

At that time, I had nine kids. We were in a lot of trauma and I was trying to figure out my whole religion thing, because the religious people in my life were... I want to use a swear word right now, but I won't. They were effed up, okay? And they were doing horrible, horrible things I never would've dreamed that Christian people would do to other people. And I was drowning, and a new relationship — that just did not cross my brain. But I really, really needed a friend, really bad. And this guy was just being a really nice, nice friend.

TOM: Well, and I remember that because I wasn't looking for a relationship. I just thought it was fun.

NATALIE: But you did think I looked good in the dress at my son's wedding.

TOM: Yes, I did. Yes, I did. But it was fun chatting with you, writing back and forth, getting to know you a little bit. I was fascinated — just, "Who is this person with nine kids?" But we were clicking, you know? It was kind of fun and it was really innocent. I wasn't like, "Oh, I'm going to marry this person." It was nothing like that.

NATALIE: Not by a long shot.

TOM: No. It just was something that kind of evolved. It slowly evolved, and I just enjoyed the conversation. I just enjoyed getting to know you.

NATALIE: Yeah. So we did a lot of that back and forth for the next month and a half. And then I think — we didn't read through this — but did you ask me if you could call me or something? I don't remember.

TOM: Yeah. But then you wanted to meet. You wanted to meet. Because you wouldn't talk to me until we met.

NATALIE: Yeah, because I thought... Okay, by this time I was starting to go, "Hmm. Something's happening here. I don't know what it is," but all of my little spidey senses were up. "I think I need to see this person face-to-face." I have a really good radar and I have ignored it for most of my life, but it's really, really good. Now many, many years out and now I know who I am, I'm much more comfortable in my skin, I know what my strengths are. I've been gaslit to believe that I am a dork brain, but I really do know what my strengths are now, and I am really good at reading people and I instinctively knew that at the time.

I thought, "You know what? I need to get together with him before I let him call me on the phone, because if I end up talking to someone where I can't read their body language, I can't read their face, I might not know what I'm getting myself into." So we set up a time to take a walk. You want to say anything?

TOM: Yeah. And it was a fall day. It was a beautiful day. I remember it being a beautiful day. And I got there before you did and I took that picture and I sent a picture, and you sent a thing back saying, "I'm on my way." So then this is one thing I remember: So you parked in the parking lot and you had sunglasses on and you never took your sunglasses off. I just found that interesting. But then we just went for a walk and we started going, and it's kind of a hilly, big park area, and there are these big paths, but we got to a point where we were going down a big steep — it was really steep and kind of rocky.

So I remember I said, "Well, why don't you grab onto my arm?" I distinctly remember this, and she grabbed onto my arm and I thought, "What is happening right now?" I remember like, "Oh, my word." And we walked down, we got to the bottom, and then I think you let go of my arm. But then we talked and it was just so natural and the conversation was great. Personally, I was very relaxed. I don't know if you were relaxed. And we had been going back and forth, you know, there was enough information that we had exchanged where we could talk about things, and then it just kind of evolved and it was effortless. I just remember it being effortless and I just enjoyed the time.

NATALIE: Yeah. What I remember is thinking, "This guy is not trying to impress me." I get really turned off by someone who's trying to impress me — like, don't do that. I can't stand fake. And he wasn't. So I remember seeing him for the first time, and I think you were wearing shorts and a sweatshirt and you looked comfortable, but you didn't look like you were going to knock someone's socks off or anything. You just looked really comfortable.

And also he had long hair and I was like, "Oh my goodness." His Facebook picture that

he was using for his profile at the time was kind of creepy. I'm serious. If you guys saw it, you'd be like, "Ooh, creepy. Why is he...?" We got him to change that eventually. And he didn't have long hair in the picture, but he had long kind of hippie hair when I met him, and a little bit unkempt. But I was like, "Cool — he looks really comfortable with himself." And then I do remember asking you some hard questions because I just wanted to see how you would answer. And one of them was, "What is something that you've done that you're ashamed of in your life?" And do you remember what you said?

TOM: I don't.

NATALIE: Oh, he doesn't even remember what he said. You said that you gambled. You played poker.

TOM: That is correct.

NATALIE: And so his brother, actually, who passed away a few years ago, his brother worked in... What is it called? Vegas?

TOM: That'd be Las Vegas, Nevada, where they gamble.

NATALIE: He worked as a... What was his name? What was his job title?

TOM: He worked at the Wind Casino and he ran the poker room at the Wind Casino.

NATALIE: Yeah. So poker's a thing — it's a whole thing and I didn't even know about it, but Tom filled me in and he wasn't doing it anymore, but he did a lot of it in his younger years. Rather than building up his retirement fund, he pretty much had fun and he traveled and played poker, and he played against some really... You played against some pretty big poker players in the world.

TOM: I did, and my brother knew a lot of those guys, so I met a lot of them too.

NATALIE: Yeah. Anyway, that was what he was, I guess, ashamed of, and I tucked that in the back of my head because I thought, "Hmm, I don't know if I want to be with someone who's a gambler." So anyway, I knew that something had happened on that walk. Things changed for me. And also I knew that he was not gay and he did not do anything that would... Actually, I think I asked you. Did I ask you?

TOM: No, I don't think you did. But I remember at the end of the walk, remember we sat down at that bench or at a picnic table and we talked some more? And I remember

thinking, "Something's happening here." I just remember that. I distinctly remember that.

NATALIE: Yeah. And this is not how the story is supposed to go. You know, I'm a big reader. I never read any story that went like this. And plus there are rules, and one of the rules is that you don't meet someone when you're in the middle of a divorce with someone else. It just doesn't happen ever. I'm saying that with tongue-in-cheek, okay? I wasn't really sure what to make of what was happening. And I guess I just decided to just let the friendship move in its own... I don't know.

TOM: Well, you thought the divorce would be over soon. So we said, "Well, why don't we just hold off," because I remember that. But then that really didn't last very long, because I just wanted to get to know this person more.

NATALIE: Yeah. So by that time, the divorce process, we were thinking that it would be over by Thanksgiving because we had a court date set that was right before Thanksgiving, and that was when it was going to be final.

And so I thought "It'll be okay to..." Yeah, actually, no. I think we started really liking each other, where we were being honest about that... Not "being honest" — I think we were honest all the time, but we were actually talking about it with each other. We were like, "There's something going on here." "Yeah, there's something." "I kind of like you." "I kind of like you too." So we started talking on the phone and there were some phone conversations there that lasted for...

TOM: ...hours.

NATALIE: Hours. So we were getting to know each other mostly on the phone. And then we looped my daughter Aimee in on it because she was fifteen at the time. And we decided that we were going to start going out on a date once a week. On Saturday nights we were going to go out, and so we had Aimee meet Tom and she knew all about it, and she was going to watch the kids for me so that I could actually go do something for myself for a change, which I never got to do anyways. So that was kind of nice.

And our relationship just kept growing. So again, we thought we were going to be able to date openly by the end of November, and that didn't happen. So what happened was my soon-to-be ex at the time ended up canceling that court hearing, and our divorce wasn't actually final for another whole year. I talked to my attorney then at that point. And I was like, "Okay, here's the deal. I thought we were going to be done.

There's this guy I want to date. I want to date him openly."

I do not like to hide things from people. I wasn't looking for a guy — never on any websites trying to find a guy. That just isn't my personality type to do that kind of thing. And I don't knock it for anyone who wants to do it, but that's probably not how I was... I was probably just going to be single for the rest of my life. I was fine with that. I was literally fine with that. I did not necessarily want to get married again.

TOM: Well, and what was interesting, I thought the same thing, because I had hit fifty, and it's like, "I'm never going to find somebody." And I was okay with that as well. You know, I was just thinking, "Okay, this is just going to be my life."

NATALIE: Yeah. But we did want to date, and my attorney was like, "You can't tell anybody. You're going to have to keep this covered up, because this really is going to throw a wrench in the whole divorce process. Your soon-to-be ex-husband could take this and use it against you. He could use it to drag out the whole thing. He could use it to take the kids away. He could use it to tell a story about how you had an affair. He could use it and make this a really big mess."

So I didn't say anything. And then it was Easter of the following year. So what we were doing then is we were just going out once a week on Saturday nights. We were going out and Aimee would watch the kids. So everything just kept going, sort of like that. And then on Easter of the following year, I had the van and my soon-to-be ex-husband at the time had a small vehicle. And so when he would take the kids, I would give him the van. Which, by the way, I had purchased. It was my van, and he would give me his little car so that he could drive the kids around if he needed to.

And so what he did though is he put a tracker on his car and he tracked me. On Good Friday, Tom and I went to a church service and I drove my car to his apartment to pick him up. Or actually, I think you drove to the church service, but I drove my car to his apartment and the tracker was on the car. And so the next day on Easter — this is Good Friday — so on Easter, or two days later on Easter... You want to tell the story, Tom?

TOM: Well, I was shopping, I was coming back, and I saw the ex-husband at the door of my apartment looking at names and going through the directory. And I got a little freaked out.

NATALIE: And he wasn't sure, but he took some pictures.

TOM: Oh, that's right.

NATALIE: Yeah. And then he also took a picture of his license plate, and then he texted them to me and he said, "Is this your soon-to-be ex-husband?" And I was, "Oh dear God almighty. Yes, it is." And then I sent an email. At that point I was like, "Okay, you know, obviously he thinks there's something going on, and I'm not going to hide it. I'm fine with people knowing and I'd rather tell everyone at this point and just let the shit hit the fan and deal with it. And I guess if it makes the divorce go even longer than it already is, then so be it. I just can't control all this stuff anymore."

So I did. I emailed all of my family members. I told them what was going on and I explained it, and the shit did hit the fan. It was not pretty, and not all of my kids understood or cared about this story. And then, of course, my soon-to-be-ex-husband decided to make it into a big thing and add some twists and turns to it that were just exactly what my attorney had warned about would happen. And so a story grew that I had actually filed for divorce because I was having an affair. And honestly, at that point, I was like, "I don't even care. I literally don't even care. Tell the story. How can we make it even more juicy and interesting? Yes!" I just didn't care. We were laughing at it by that time.

TOM: Well, I remember too, by that point, all these things had been happening, and you know, this happens and I'm thinking, "What is going on?" But I remember through every part of our relationship, I was always drawn closer to you. I felt like I was being pulled towards you and I wanted to get to know you more. Because there were a lot of things that were going on, and the kids, and I'm Roman Catholic, she's a Baptist, and all of those things didn't seem to matter. And I remember praying about it. I remember talking to my mom about it. I'm really close to my mom. But everything was bringing me closer to you. So at every twist and turn I wanted to be with you.

And then I thought, "Well, this is it. This is the real thing." And the thing I remember more than anything is just from the very beginning, we were always honest with each other. And you had asked me some tough questions and I just, "You know what? I'm just going to say it." At that point in my life, I was just like, "Well, this is who I am and this is... You know what I've done." And I think that set our relationship up to be one where it was open and honest and I never felt like we were hiding anything from each other. And we just kind of knew who each other was and we just kept on liking each other, which I thought all of that was good.

NATALIE: It was good. And so the rest of that year it was just kind of the same old, same old. I had to deal with the fallout with my family. My oldest son and his wife decided that for this and for other reasons — it came out later that there were other reasons why — but this was the time that they decided that they weren't going to talk to me

anymore. So I did lose contact with them for two and a half years, and that was extremely painful. My dad was dying of cancer at the time, so there was a lot of stuff going on in my family of origin. My youngest sister had cut me off by that time. Her and her husband are very rigid, conservative Christians and did not believe in divorce, did not believe in remarriage after divorce, and I was like a Jezebel to them, so that was the end of that. So it was a hard year, but also a good year.

And we just kept developing our relationship, and then eventually my divorce was final because all things do come to an end, including bad things. And in November, my divorce was final in November... So my birthday was November 7, the divorce was final on November 8. So my ex-husband got the house, our marital home. And by that time we had already talked about getting married, Tom and I had. And Tom purchased a home that summer. He was living in an apartment. So in preparation for this, Tom purchased a home close to where my kids went to school, and then we were going to get married.

So maybe we can talk about our thoughts about getting married right after the divorce. Because where was I going to go? I had to get out of the marital home after the divorce was final, and we could have moved into an apartment with the kids, but the only reason would've been to avoid more gossip. And already there were so many stories swirling about us and so much gossip, it was like... I mean, I don't know.

TOM: No, yeah, we were past all that by that time, and we decided to get the house and then we just planned it out — we were just ready. I was ready, I think you were ready. You know, you get divorced on the eighth and we got married on the ninth, but by that time there was a lot going on, but I didn't think it was... I thought it was great. I thought the whole process was great. The wedding was small and intimate and it was a Roman Catholic and a Baptist being married by a Lutheran woman. It was the best. I loved it. I loved the whole thing. And we got to get married in the church — you know, that was so nice. Wasn't that nice how that was all set up? I just thought it was perfect.

NATALIE: It was perfect. Now, we didn't have any family come. My family of origin was not invited. His family of origin was not invited. We'd only had my kids, the ones that were younger. The oldest three boys didn't come. But think about it: They were definitely the most uncomfortable with what was going on, and also had been left out of the loop for the most part. The younger kids by that time had already spent time with Tom. They were comfortable with him, they knew him, and the older boys were very uncomfortable with the whole thing.

So anyway, we had this beautiful little wedding in which David was I think four at the

time. He has autism. He was literally running around the church while we were doing the ceremony. It was hilarious. And then afterwards we went to Bakers Square where my daughter worked as a server and we had pie and fries, and that was our reception. It was really fun.

TOM: It was great. I loved it.

NATALIE: Now, the following year, we celebrated our first anniversary by going back to Baker Square with all of our kids and had pie and fries, and we were laughing because they were just out of control. The kids were just out of control. They were naughty, they were crying, they were complaining. It was like, "Nice anniversary." But anyway, that's what happens when you marry someone with nine kids in a lot of craziness.

Let's see, I wanted to say one more thing about... Oh, that we didn't have a honeymoon because we weren't able to... So this is the dynamic when you've got lots of kids and lots of craziness: You can't really get away. And so we did not have a honeymoon, but guess what? This year we celebrated five years of marriage — very happy years, I might say, that are abuse free, and we celebrated our honeymoon. You want to talk about our honeymoon?

TOM: Yeah, we went out to Southern California. It was really nice, just the two of us. I think that was the first time you and I were together without kids for more than three days. So it was just nice to spend time with each other and decompress and just be able to be with each other. That was nice.

NATALIE: It was nice. We had good food. Tom was sick, unfortunately. He was hacking up both of his lungs the whole time. But other than that, it was a very nice vacation. And we didn't really do anything other than just... We had an Airbnb, and we spent a lot of time on the beach just walking. It was cold. I know. It was cold and it was in Del Mar, near San Diego. But it was cold. It poured rain one day and they said, "Yeah, it never does that. It's been..." What did they say? "It's been generations since..." I kind of doubt it's been generations, but it was poured rain and was super windy one day. And then after we left, it got really nice again, so I don't know. I guess we brought some Minnesota weather to California. You're welcome.

TOM: Well, it was like that last time you were in San Diego. It snowed, right?

NATALIE: That's right. The first time I was in San Diego is when I was twenty-two or twenty-three, and we just went for a day. We drove over from Arizona, my friends and I did, and we went to the San Diego Zoo and it snowed that day. So those are my two

experiences of San Diego. Fun times.

Anyway, that is our story. I wish I would've asked my people in the Flying Free program if they had any questions for you. I know some people don't understand why you would marry someone with nine kids. And there's a lot of women who would like to be remarried, but they think that no one would like them or no one would want them because they have this past and they're divorced. So why don't you talk if you have any thoughts for them. I mean, are men looking for pristine, perfect people, or what?

TOM: Well, I know I was looking for just a real relationship, one that felt normal. We talked about this when I was dating, that I never felt, even in high school, I never was in a clique. I never "belonged" anywhere until I met you. And then I felt like I finally found my place where I belong. And then with the kids, you know, I thought I was going to be bachelor guy, never have any kids. So to have that experience and watch these younger kids get older and develop relationships with the older boys now, it has been a blessing in my life that I really don't have words for other than it's a gift. It's a gift from God, and I enjoy it and I enjoy all of them. You know, they're all different and they're all unique and they teach me things. You know, the little boys, David, Peter, they teach me things every day, and I'm so thankful that I have that now in my life.

NATALIE: And we, our whole family, all of them, now, all nine of them, are so thankful that their mom has Tom and that they have Tom. They all enjoy Tom. We have had some amazing family gatherings and I feel like Tom's definitely part of our family now. And now it's weird. It's definitely weird. This is not the path that I would've chosen, and it's not the path that I thought that I was going to go through, but it is the path of a lot of people that live on planet earth because life is messy — it's messy and it's also really beautiful. And I think that there's so much love to be had.

And I think that too, Tom brought a lot of healing to our family just in being someone who is just quietly there and supporting everyone and giving everyone freedom to just be who they are. And he's been instrumental in helping me to be able to be who I am without being afraid. And I can say whatever's on my mind, I can have a bad day, and he doesn't condemn me or make me feel like I'm a bad person.

And the other thing that I just want to say is that he's been so supportive, 150% supportive, of my work and everything that I do to help women of faith come out of emotionally and spiritually abusive relationships. And both of us have been kind of going on our own deconstruction journey as well. He's a Catholic, and of course I come out of that conservative, Reformed Baptist kind of thinking. So we have had our own kind of journey of trying to figure out what do we do about church and what do we do

about just all the religious things. Do you have anything you want to say about that?

TOM: We were talking one night and you made a comment to me about how, you mentioned that I have helped you be able to move along in your career and help a lot of different people, and I like to help people. I think I'm a giving person. I never looked at it that way, that I was able to watch the kids while you were writing the book and be able to support you when you had things that you needed done and I needed to run around and get kids or whatever it might be. And that really kind of grounded me and it told me, "Hey, I'm making a difference too," not only in these kids' lives, but in the women that you're trying to help. And I do think about that and that makes me happy.

And you mentioned earlier, there are good guys out there, and I think you have to get them in the right spot and the timing and things. I think, like we mentioned earlier, I think our timing was perfect and I think we are together because of that, and I totally think it's a God thing, and I'm so thankful for every moment that I have with you and the kids.

NATALIE: Aw.

TOM: I love you, Natalie.

NATALIE: I love you too, Tom. You guys. That's all I have for you. If you want to find a great guy like Tom, go to joinflyingfree.com. Just kidding. I'm just kidding. Actually though, I have something that you can find that's way better, And that's an amazing relationship with the woman that has your name. And honestly, I really believe that when you can find and drop into deep, intimate love for who you are and for all of the parts of you, the good, the bad, the ugly, the amazing, all of those parts of you that need to be seen and known and loved, when you can find that, you're going to be in the best possible position to be able to find that outside of you as well.

So if you're interested in doing that work with us, that is exactly what we're doing over in Flying Free, and we'd love to have you join us. There's an application process to get in, but it's very affordable. And there are tons of reviews on that page as well as all the details about what you'd get with your membership — joinflyingfree.com.

And you know, maybe we'll do a follow-up. Tom and I were talking about possibly opening it up to questions inside of our private forum, which is a part of what you get as a member of Flying Free. And if you have any follow-up questions for this podcast, he actually said he'd be willing to come back and do a follow-up, so especially if you have any questions for him. You guys, you can ask me questions anytime in the forum

and in our Q&A's. But I think you should grill Tom. I really do.

So alright, you guys — that's it for real. That's all I have for you. Thank you so much for listening, and until next time, fly free.